

Keep the 'escalator' of social mobility going, or risk anxiety of those in the middle: Tharman

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Urging Singaporeans to keep the "escalator" of social mobility moving, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam warned that once it stops, those caught in the middle will be steeped in "pervasive anxiety" of not only trailing those advancing further, but also looking over their shoulder at those who are catching up.

Mr Tharman was speaking at a dialogue session, chaired by Ambassador Tommy Koh, on Thursday evening (Oct 25) — ahead of a conference to mark the 30th anniversary of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

He said: "Once the escalator that carries everyone up stops, the problems of inequality and all the problems of me-against-you, this-group-against-that-group, become much sharper. And this is exactly what has happened in a whole range of advanced economies."

Mr Tharman is the latest in a string of government leaders — including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Education Minister Ong Ye Kung — who have weighed in on the hot-button issues of social mobility and inequality, which have ignited a spirited debate in recent weeks.

While Singapore is doing better than most in spurring social mobility now, it is going to face more challenges, he said.

This is because the country has succeeded in driving "waves of mobility" for a population that largely started off poor, and have excelled in school, worked hard and done well in life.

"Those whose grandparents were poor, had parents who were not so poor, (they) now are no longer poor and are quite well-off, and they invest in their children as much as they can, so that their children can do well," he said.

At the other end, those who have not succeeded find that the odds stacked against their success in life have increased.

This means Singapore needs to work harder to keep mobility going, which requires intervention from early in life to "help people do well for themselves".

Social mobility is at the "heart and soul of our ambition" as a society, Mr Tharman said, and it is critical that Singapore sustains a system in which its people are moving up the social ladder.

Inequality becomes a sharper and more brittle issue when stagnation in the middle class happens.

"This, too, is what we see in a range of advanced countries: That pervasive anxiety of people in the middle. As someone is catching up, then someone is moving away from them," Mr Tharman said. "So, keep the escalator moving."

Social mobility is "much easier" with a moving escalator, as there are more opportunities, new skills to be learnt and new jobs to be obtained. "What I get is not just at the expense of someone else, I can move up without someone else moving down," he said, noting Singapore has done relatively well in this regard.

GENERATIONAL INEQUALITY

"Generational inequality" has formed a "good part" of the inequality here, Mr Tharman said.

More than 60 per cent of those aged 55 and above who had no more than secondary school education, performed and worked hard in simple jobs, are now at the lower end of the escalator, even as subsequent generations have moved up.

He said the focus should be to help mature workers in their mid-50s to -60s work for as long as they please, to do so with dignity, and at a decent wage with the support of employers, the Government and the public.

Following on from this point, Prof Koh's view is that inequality will not disappear when the older generation fades away. Singapore has become increasingly stratified and unequal in wealth, income, occupation, housing type and other areas, and has become a "very class-conscious society", he said.

While the Deputy Prime Minister said that Singapore was much less class-conscious than many societies, it is at risk of becoming more so.

He spoke about a toilet attendant he had a chat with before the dialogue. The man told him that his wages have gone up since he started working on the job eight years ago, and his employer has assigned him to go for training.

Prof Koh then said that Singapore's elite does not show respect for low-wage workers such as cleaners, gardeners and security guards, who are "treated as invisible".

Responding, Mr Tharman said that ageism is still an issue here, and ordinary low-wage workers deserve more respect and regard. This was not only a problem for the elite, he said, and everyone from customers to the public, and critically, employers — with the Government's support — have a part to play.

TACKLING POVERTY

While Singapore ranks among the top in terms of per-capita income, Prof Koh — who is special adviser to the IPS — noted that there are many poor people here. For instance, his research estimates that 100,000 to 140,000 households lack the means to pay for their basic human needs.

Mr Tharman said that there is the need to find "every way possible" to lift these people out of the poverty cycle to avoid the problem persisting over generations. "There is a risk of this becoming entrenched and passing on from one generation to the next... We have to work harder at this task."

Having said that, he noted that those living in absolute poverty here are in much smaller numbers than elsewhere, and there has been a "dramatic transformation in the middle of society". This is borne out in the increased standards of living, and those in the lower-income groups are now five times better off than in the past, after adjusting for increases in cost of living.

At the dialogue, infectious diseases expert and opposition politician Paul Tambyah highlighted the gaps in the lifespans of people from different ethnic groups in Singapore. He asked if more needs to be done about the structural factors that led to such a form of inequality, where those from the lower-income groups die at a younger age than those from higher-income ones.

Mr Tharman said that a variety of factors, including lifestyles and diets, lead to shorter lifespans, and not income levels per se.

Dr Gillian Koh, IPS' deputy director for research, asked for Mr Tharman's assessment of the progress of Singapore's Progressive Wage Model for cleaners, security and landscaping workers, and whether a minimum wage strategy should be considered.

He replied that the Progressive Wage Model has worked quite well so far, with significant wage increases seen over the years. Minimum wage models in other countries do not end up benefiting those from lower-income families in many instances, but those largely from the middle-income groups or above, who happen to do lower-end jobs, he said.

SECTION 377A: NO ONE SHOULD FEEL DEMONISED IN S'PORE

Wading into the topic of a growing intolerance in society, Professor Tommy Koh pointed to how a religious organisation recently invited a friend to speak on a secular topic at a conference, only to have his invitation withdrawn because he had signed a petition to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code, which criminalises gay sex.

"We can disagree, but there's no need to demonise each other," he said.

He also urged the Government to show greater tolerance, expressing hope that it will no longer ban movies and withdraw book grants. "Let's be big-hearted. We've reached a stage of political and cultural maturity where we could accommodate different points of view," said Prof Koh, to applause from the audience.

In September, Prof Koh called on the gay community in Singapore to challenge Section 377A of the Penal Code again, after India's Supreme Court struck down its law against consensual gay sex.

Mr Tharman said that no one should feel demonised in Singapore, which is a diverse society. "We have to respect each other and make sure that, whatever our views on specific topics, there's a solid core of shared aspirations and beliefs that hold us together," he added.